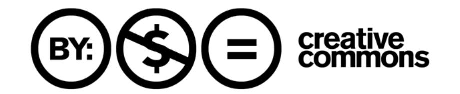


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Corsairs in Iceland

Bernard Lewis



CORSAIRS IN ICELAND

by Bernard LEWIS

For many centuries the Barbary corsairs had operated principally in galleys. These vessels required hundreds of rowers, who were expensive both to obtain and to maintain, and were in any case becoming more difficult to find. The cruising range of the galley was limited by the need to carry great quantities of food and water for the rowers, while its construction, designed for the calmer waters of the Mediterranean, made it unfit to with stand the heavier strains of the open ocean.

At the beginning of the 17th century, however, an important development took place which enabled the corsairs greatly to extend the scope and scale of their enterprises. After the death of Queen Elizabeth of England in 1603, the new king James I at last made peace with Spain, and by the treaty of 1604 the long maritime war between the two countries came to an end. At about the same time the long Spanish struggle with the Netherlands ended, and in 1609 Spain was finally compelled to recognize the independence of the Dutch. The many English and Dutch sea-rovers, who had played an important part in the struggle against Spain, now became not only unnecessary but a nuisance, and the English and other western governments began to adopt measures of increasing severity against their own pirates, for the protection of international trade. Many of these pirates, finding conditions in their own countries less and less favourable to the exercise of their profession, fled to the states of the North African littoral, where they received a ready welcome. English and Dutch pirates, accustomed to navigating the oceans of the world on square-rigged sailing ships with their armament disposed along their sides, introduced these vessels to their hosts, and instructed them in their construction and use. The corsairs, quick to realise the advantages of the broadside sailing-ship over the galley, mastered the arts of navigation and warfare with these new vessels with remarkable speed, and before long fleets from North Africa were sailing beyond the Straits of Gibraltar and ravaging as far away as Madeira, England and Ireland. Certainly their boldest venture was their raid on Iceland in the year 1627 (1).

(1) See Ch. A. Julien, *Histoire de l'Afrique du Nord.* 2nd edition, revised by Roger Le Tourneau, II, Paris 1961, 274 ff. ; S. Lane-Poole, *The Barbary Corsairs,* London 1890, 228 ff. ; Aziz Samih, *Şimali Afrikada Türkler,* Istanbul 1937, I, 174 ; R.C. Anderson, *Naval wars in the Levant,* Princeton 1952, 67 ff.

The first published account of this expedition is that of the French priest Pierre Dan, who visited North Africa in 1634 to arrange for the redemption of Christian captives. In his history of the Barbary corsairs published in Paris in 1637, he tells briefly of an Algerian corsair raid on Iceland in 1627. It was carried out, he says, by three ships, and was led by a renegade of German origin known as Come Murat. The corsairs raided a number of different places on the Icelandic coast and carried off 400 captives (2).

A second French account dates from the year 1642. In that year Sieur Emanuel d'Aranda, about to leave Algiers on being ransomed from captivity, was approached by a young "Turk" who asked him to carry a letter to the Danish minister in Madrid. D'Aranda, puzzled by so odd a request, questioned the man, who turned out to be an Icelander converted to Islam. "Some years earlier", the man told him, "an Icelandic renegade, having for long sailed with the corsairs of this city without making any prize, suggested to the captain that they should sail to Iceland". The raid was made and produced 800 captives, many of whom were still awaiting ransom (3).

These two brief and contradictory accounts are all that, to my knowledge, is to be found in general Western sources of the time on the expedition to Iceland of the Algerian corsairs. So extraordinary an event, however, was not passed over in silence by the Icelanders themselves, nor by the Danes, to whose King Iceland was at that time subject. In both Icelandic and in Danish there is a considerable volume of material on the raid, and even a prayer in the Icelandic liturgy asking God for protection against "the cunning of the Pope and the terror of the Turk".

The first account to be published was the narrative of Olafur Egilsson, an Icelandic priest from Heimaey, in the Vestmann islands, who was captured by the corsairs and taken to Algiers. After a short stay, he was sent by his captors to Copenhagen to negotiate with the Danish authorities for the ransom of the captives. His account of his adventures, from his capture to his return home on 6th July 1628, was first published in a Danish translation in 1641 (4). The Icelandic original was not printed until 1852, when it appeared in Reykjavík together with another brief and contemporary account by Klaus Eyjolfsson (5). Another important contemporary source, the *Tyrkjarânssaga* of Björn Jônsson of Skardsà (1574-1655) was printed in 1866 (6). It was written in 1643, and based on the

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(2) Pierre Dan, *Histoire de Barbarie et de ses Corsaires,* Paris 1637, Book III, 276. "En 1627 trois vaisseaux d'Alger, conduits par un Renegat Allemand, nommé Come Murat, furent si hardis que d'aller jusques'en Dannemarc, ou prenant terre en l'Isle d'Island, ils enlevèrent plusieurs mesnages escartes l'un de l'autre, & firent esclaves quatre cens personnes qu'ils emmenerent". In the Dutch translation of Dan's book (Amsterdam 1684), the leader's name is given as Kure Murat.

(3) Emanuel d'Aranda, *Relation de la Captivité,* 4th edition, Leiden 1671, 368-72.

(4) Oluf Eigilssen, *En Kort Beretning om de Tyrkiske Söröveres onde Medfart og Omgang. . . ,* Copenhagen 1641.

(5) Olafur Egilsson, *Lítil Saga um herhlaup Tyrkjans arid 1627,* Reykjavik 1852. The difference between the Danish and Icelandic forms of the author's name will be noted.

(6) Björn Jônsson, *Tyrkjaránssaga,* Reykjavík 1866.

two above mentioned texts, supplemented by letters from captives in Algiers, oral information from ransomed captives, and a number of other written sources that are no longer extant. A critical study of the whole episode was published in Danish in 1899 by the Icelandic scholar Sigfús Blöndal (7). It was based not only on the printed sources then available, but also on a number of narratives and records then still in manuscript, including many letters from Icelandic and Danish captives preserved in various collections. Finally, in 1906-9, another Icelandic scholar, Jón Thorkelsson, published a volume of texts, containing all the known sources on the expedition. After a detailed historical introduction on the raid, its origin, course, and results, he gives critical texts of twelve different accounts of the expedition. These are followed by a collection of letters and other documents, including letters from prisoners, negotiations about ransoms, reports on the Icelandic captives in Algiers, accounts and correspondence on the collection of money and the arranging of ransoms. The volume ends with a collection of poems and ballads in Icelandic relating to the raid (8).

The story begins on 20th June 1627, when an Algerian ship entered the little port of Grindavík, on the south coast of Reykjanes, the southernmost promontory on the west coast of Iceland. The origins of the raid are uncertain. Returned Icelandic captives said that the originator of the raid was a Danish captive in Algiers, whom they name only as Paul. In return for a promise of freedom he gave the corsairs information about the Northern Seas, which he knew well, and accompanied them on the raid. This man is probably identical with the Icelandic renegade mentioned by d'Aranda.

According to Icelandic reports twelve ships set out on the expedition, of which only four actually reached Iceland. The others probably went to England. The leader of the expedition was one Murad Reis, variously described as a German or Flemish (=Dutch) renegade. The rest of the expedition was, as usual, of mixed origin – some Turks, some Western converts, as well as a number of Western captives employed as slaves. This is how Olafur Egilsson describes his captors. The reader will note Olaf's naive astonishment that the dreaded corsairs looked "just like other people", and his remark that it was the converts who behaved worst.

"Now I will say something about how these wicked people looked, both as regards their faces and their clothing, namely, that they were exactly like other people, unequal of height, some white, some with darker faces ; some were not Turks, but people of other countries, such as Norwegians, Danes, Germans and English ; of these, those who had not left their religion still wore their old clothes in which they had been captured, and had to do the most dangerous work that arose, and received blows as wages. But the Turks [i.e. Muslims] all had tall red

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(7) Sigfús Blöndal, "De Algierske Söröveres Tog til Island aar 1627", *Nord og Syd* (Copenhagen), 1898-9, 193-208. This excellent article forms the main basis of the account given here.

(8) Jón Thorkelsson (ed.), *Tyrkjaránid á Íslandi 1627*, published by the Sögufjelag, Reykjavík 1906-9. A very brief account of the raid will be found in Knut Gjerset, *History of Icelad*, London 1923, 319-320.

caps, some cocked, with gold galloons, some with silk and others with braid ; they wore long robes, bound round with sashes, as their robes were very wide ; they wore tight canvas breeches, and many went barefoot, with iron heels under their feet ; they had black hair, and were shaved except over the mouth, where they had moustaches. The real Turks in their behaviour were just like other nations, if one may say so ; those who had been Christians and abandoned their faith followed in clothes, beards and other things the same usage as the Turks, and it was just these that killed people, cursed and beat them, and did all that is evil" (9).

When the corsair fleet arrived off Iceland, it was split up by a severe storm. One ship, separated from the others, entered Grindavík alone on 20th June. In the harbour lay a Danish merchant ship. The corsairs pretended to be whale-fishers, and thanks to this disguise were able to seize the cargo of the Danish ship without any difficulty. After a raid ashore they sailed out with booty and prisoners. On their way out they met another Danish merchant ship, which they boarded and captured, putting a corsair crew on board. One of the captured ships was sent back to Algiers with the booty ; the other two ships sailed round the west coast of Iceland in the direction of Faxa Bay.

News of the raid spread rapidly, causing great alarm. A system of signal warnings was arranged, and both people and ships assembled at Bessastadir. This town, lying in a small bay called Seila, a few miles south of Reyjavík, was the residence of the Danish governor of Iceland and the centre of administration throughout the 17th century. It so happened that at this time the famous Jon Olafsson, the Icelandic traveller who is remembered for his journey to India, was in Bessastadir on a visit, accompanied by some Frenchmen. His biography, written by his son Olafur Jónsson, gives the following account of the coming of the corsairs to Bessastadir :

"Jon Olafsson's journey was deferred, and he received orders to stay until he should know for certain how matters stood. The Governor ordered all to be ready to take up their positions for defence, and Jon Olafsson and the Frenchmen were commanded to repair to the fort and be ready to fire the cannon when needed. But the Governor with his servants and a great number of Icelanders in large brass-bound saddles rode about keeping watch with long staves in their hands, so that it was as if one saw armoured men, when the sun shone on their saddle-bows.

And when they were all prepared for defence on land, the pirate ships began to sail into the harbour. When those on the ships and in the fort perceived this, they fired some salvos at them, and the pirates replied by firing on them on shore. But just this moment, by God's appointed plan, one of the two robber vessels ran aground and stuck fast, for the tide was far out. This was the vessel which had the captive people on board and most of the goods. When the other pirates saw this, both vessels lowered their boats to remove the people and goods from the stranded vessel to the other, in order to lighten it, and they also

(9) *En Kort Beretning,* 19-20.

threw overboard many barrels of goods, meal, oil and other liquids, which were heaviest, and which they had taken on Danish ships. The most part drifted ashore, and on these were the mark of the merchant Bogi Nielsson, merchant at Skutilsfjörd. This Jon Olafsson recognized and so knew that a vessel from the Skutilsfjörd port must have been captured by the pirates. While the pirates were splashing about and conveying men and goods from one ship to the other, the Danes left off firing at them, both from the Danish ships, and (alas !) from the fort, but the Icelanders desired to fire at them as much as possible while they were in these difficulties. But in this they did not have their way (10), and so the pirate ship floated off with the rising tide, and both left Seila, and sailed back along the south coast, and were seen no more until they came to the Vestmann Islands and plundered there in the month of June. These ships came to Seila shortly before the time of the Althing [Icelandic Parliament], and therefore neither the Governor, nor any of those then at Bessastadir, rode to the Althing that summer, by reason of the general terror" (11).

The vessels that later visited the Vestmann Islands were not in fact the same as those that had come to Bessastadir. These latter sailed home, without waiting for the others, and carried with them fifteen Icelandic and an unknown number of Danish captives.

Meanwhile two other ships sailed up the east coast. On 5th July they landed with four boats at the Herutsfjörd, and left again on 13th July with booty and captives. After several other small raids they sailed south with 110 captives. Off the south coast they met the fourth ship and together sailed to the Vestmann Islands. On their way they met an English fishing boat and forced the captain to give them pilots for the dangerous passage into Kaupstad harbour.

The Vestmann Islands are a group of small islands four miles south of Iceland, of which only the largest, Heimaey, was inhabited. It had been raided several times earlier in the century by Spanish and English pirates. News of the approach of the corsairs reached the islanders, and the Icelandic sources tell of wild rumours of "Turks with claws instead of nails, spitting fire and sulphur, with knives growing out of their breasts, elbows, and knees". The islanders hastily prepared defences around the Danish trading house.

On the morning of 16th July three ships were sighted approaching the island. Despite the preparations no serious resistance was offered, and the corsairs were able to land three large forces. Much booty and many captives were taken, and a Danish merchant ship, the *Krabbe*, was seized in the port, filled with captives and manned by a corsair crew. The corsair flotilla fired nine shots from their cannon as a parting salute and sailed away with 242 captives.

The return journey to Algiers is vividly described by Olafur Egilsson, the captured priest from Heimaey. The weather was very bad, and for a week the

(10) Some of the other Icelandic sources severely criticise the negligence of the Danish governor Holger Rosenkrands on this occasion.

(11) *The Life of the Icelander Jon Olafsson*, translated from the Icelandic edition of Dr. Sigfús Blöndal, by Dame Bertha Philpotts, ii, London 1932, 258-9. To my knowledge this is the only one of the original sources available in translation.

Krabbe was separated from the other ships. The prisoners on the *Krabbe* outnumbered the corsairs several times, and planned to revolt and seize the ship. The plan, however, was betrayed and frustrated. One of the prisoners was a Dane who got into conversation with the Danish renegade Paul and, no doubt with the idea of making himself important, asked him how many mice were needed to kill a cat. Paul understood what was in his mind, and warned the other corsairs. The prisoners were put in irons until the *Krabbe* was able to rejoin the rest of the flotilla. Olafur Egilsson remarks that the prisoners were quite well treated on the journey, and notes with surprise that the Turks gave them beer, mead and brandy to drink while they themselves drank only water.

The captives were confined below decks, and, says Olafur Egilsson :

"Since it was dark there, they had lamps burning both night and day, and every evening food was prepared for us, and we were given the same dishes as the officers got in their cabin ; as long as the two tuns of beer and mead, which they seized in the merchants' house in Vestmann Island, lasted, we were given drink from them. They destroyed all the drink in the merchants' houses. Brandy they only gave us in the morning ; the Turks never drink anything but water" (12).

The ships returned to Algiers on 17th August, and the captives were sold. Olaf was sent to Copenhagen to arrange ransom, and considerable efforts were made to collect money for this purpose. A document of 1635 lists 31 men and 39 women as remaining in captivity, while another of the following year records the redemption of 34. The testimony of d'Aranda shows that some were still in Africa in 1642. Two at least of the captives stayed voluntarily and made a career among the corsairs. One of them, Jón Asbjarnarson, obtained a high post at the court of the Dey, while the other, Jón Jónsson Vestmann, became a sea captain in the corsair service. After many adventures he finally returned to Europe and died in Copenhagen (13).

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(12) *En Kort Beretning,* 22.

(13) Blöndal, *loc. cit.,* 207-8.